

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH SECRETARY OF THE ARMY PETE GEREN
VIA TELECONFERENCE SUBJECT: BLOGGING AND NEW MEDIA DATE: SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 20,
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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, Office of the
Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): We have Secretary Geren on the line
now so let's see if I can do this correctly.

And Secretary Geren, this is Jack Holt. Welcome to the DOD Bloggers'
Roundtable and the Mil Blog Conference for 2008. Sir, can you hear me all
right?

SEC. GEREN: I can, Jack. Glad to be joining you.

MR. HOLT: All right. Let me get the speaker turned up here just a
little bit and we can make sure --

MR. : (Off mike.)

MR. HOLT: Yeah, let me -- okay. All right, sir. Do you have an
opening statement for us?

SEC. GEREN: Thank you for letting me join you for the 2008 Mil Blog
Conference. This is an important event and in the Army we look at blogging and
other forms of the new media as important opportunities for us to communicate to
our audiences inside and outside the Army. And I appreciate the chance to visit
with you all today.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. And appreciate you being here with us.

So questions -- who wants to? Okay, Ward.

Q Mr. Secretary, is Ward Carroll of Military.com.

You know, the political arena is in full force and a lot of folks have
hooted on Senator McCain about his cultural illiteracy around the Internet. How
would you rate yours? (Laughter.)

SEC. GEREN: I apologize. I couldn't hear you very well --
(interrupted by laughter) -- and then I didn't hear the last part. Could you get
closer to the --

MR. HOLT: Yeah, yeah. Why don't you come on over.

SEC. GEREN: It's kind of echoing. I can hear Jack's voice very clearly, but I guess it sounds as if you may be fairly far away from the receiver and there's a lot of echo behind your voice.

Q Roger that, Mr. Secretary. I guess we're figuring out our connectivity with you here.

The question was -- and I made a joke about Senator McCain's Internet savvy. How would you rate your own? I mean, did this bubble up from the bottom? Is this something that you feel strongly about? Do you use the Internet? Do you understand new media -- just looking for a candid assessment of that.

SEC. GEREN: I use the Internet a great deal. I use it for research. I have many websites that I go to regularly as a way to research and get news and stay informed. As far as blogging, I can tell you it's not something that I was really that familiar with more than a couple years ago.

And it's interesting when we had that event back in the last presidential campaign, '04, when you had Dan Rather had a story on President Bush and his Guard service, and then bloggers took his story apart. And it struck me that here's one of the great icons of traditional media and he was undone by bloggers. And that was a wakeup call for me. I thought, well, I need to better understand the world of blogs. And in fact, when I used to encourage in my speeches our soldiers and other people in Army leadership to blog, I used to jokingly say, I don't know what a blog is, but I know that Dan Rather does. (Laughter.)

Since then, I have focused more on it. And I have, in fact, over the last couple of years have been reaching out within our organization to try to find people who can help me in that area. And I hired a guy -- I guess several months ago -- who has spent many years active in new media and was an active blogger.

But now, part of my morning briefing -- every morning when my public affairs officer comes in and briefs me on, you know, news from around the world, part of that briefing is what's going on in the blogosphere. And there are few blogs that I check into and I've even done, I guess, two blog interviews.

And when I give speeches to our senior leaders, I encourage them to embrace the new media. And not just blogging. We're trying to use other forms of new media to reach out particularly to, you know, our 17 to 25-year-old crowd, which is really our main market in the Army; that's the heart and soul of the Army. You know, we've got an active Twitter account. We've got a page on MySpace and Facebook and we use YouTube to put out important messages about the Army.

I've rambled on too long. But anyway, let me stop there and glad to answer any follow-up question that you have.

Q Obviously, if you're trying a new initiative, there must be some sense that the way you were getting your message out wasn't working.

What are your personal frustrations with how the war, the state of the Army, the state of recruiting -- whatever your top five concerns are -- have been handled by the traditional mechanisms? And I'm not just pointing at the

mainstream media. I'm talking about your traditional mechanisms of recruiting - you know, recruit commands and the public affairs mechanisms. What have you been frustrated with their ability to get the message out?

And also, personally, how you've been frustrated or not by the mainstream media's treatment of a fact set?

SEC. GEREN: Well, I really don't see the frustration led by interest in new media. It's just a recognition that the world changes and there's probably nothing more dynamic in the world than information technology and communications technology.

And the it's -- you know, the way we communicated 20 years ago was different than 10 years ago and 10 years ago is different than today and six months from now is going to be different from today as well. And as an organization, as an institution, we've got to work very hard to keep up. We are a national institution. We've got over a million soldiers, active Guard and Reserve. We've got millions of dependents -- when you consider spouses and kids -- and we've got multimillions of parents out there. And as an institution, it's critical that we reach out and communicate with as many parts of the expanded Army family, as well as the general public, as we can. And we've got to embrace every form of media. And this new media, particularly blogging, is -- for many people, has replaced traditional media as a way to get news and not only get news, but educate themselves -- the back-and-forth that blogs offer.

So I see it as just an addition to what we are doing and a mechanism to reach some people who you don't reach at all with so-called traditional media. There are, you know, a lot of folks have just flat quit reading newspapers. They don't watch the regular channels on television. They are able to set their computers so that they only get the information on the issues that they personally want to receive. They can filter and screen information out. So we've got to just accept that as a reality.

We've got multiple, very important messages at the United States Army -- and an Army that's an American institution that depends upon the support of the public in order to do the important work the Army does. And blogs and new media help us to reach folks that you just flat can't reach if you're counting on paper newspapers.

MR. HOLT: Okay, anyone else? Yeah. Okay, John.

Q John Donovan, Mr. Secretary.

I'm a retired a soldier who blogs at castle.org -- and I'm not going to ask if that's on your list of daily reads. My ego probably can't handle the answer.

I happened to be out at Fort Leavenworth and General Caldwell has reached out to me on occasion -- as have several of his senior leaders -- and one of the things that came up in an earlier panel discussion was changing the corporate culture.

Ward here has been out and he's talked to the majors. I have actually been the guy running around talking to the colonels about blogging. And we all know that General Bergner, General Caldwell, General Petraeus, Admiral Fox -- the flag officers clearly have come around.

The pressure of the war made that easy, because the actual change to embrace new media came out of CENTCOM. Then it came to OSD. And then after we pummeled your guys last year, then it came to us too.

But one of the things you get when you talk to majors -- and I got a strong sense of talking to the colonels, and this really -- how do we change the culture at the 05-06 level? Or are we just going to have to wait some of those guys out?

SEC. GEREN: Very good question. And as you know, General Caldwell, out at Leavenworth, has blogging as part of his curriculum. In order to graduate, you've got to blog. And he's a guy that very much understands the importance of new media. He used it when he was in-theater, and now he's in such an important education position for the Army, his leadership on this area -- you know, all those majors flow through Leavenworth and then go out to the field.

But I think there are generational challenges and that's a fact. The first questioner asked, you know, how I would characterize my own fluency in new media. And I used to joke -- and I could probably still level this joke at me that I'm -- when it comes to the Internet, I'm road kill. I am way behind the times, but I have embraced it and I'm working through it and now find it a very important part of my information gathering and my information exchange.

But I think that, you know, a lot of people my age resist it. And that's -- it's a generational issue. I saw -- in fact, I was talking to -- I won't name the company, but the CEO of one organization told me that -- it's a very large company -- and said he's assigned a young person to every one of his senior officers to be his or her tutor in the language of the new media and blogosphere. They actually have kind of the equivalent of a Seeing Eye dog to help them find their way.

So there are generational issues. There's no doubt about it that a 60-year-old is probably going to find it more difficult. If you're 22 years old, you grow up fluent in it. It's like a fluent second language for so many people.

My kids -- it's just amazing! They don't even read the instructions on any type of technology. They just break it right open and start using it. I struggle through those 60, 70-page instruction manuals. So there are some generational issues. I acknowledge that and I think it's important to show people how powerful the new media is.

I have gotten -- not only do I encourage some of our senior officers to blog, but I recently got the wives of several senior officers to blog as a way to communicate their years of experience to young spouses. And all of them enjoyed it immensely and are glad to do it again. It's something they hadn't done before, though.

MR. HOLT: All right.

Do you feel sir -- I'm going to follow up, because it really continues the conversation -- having gotten this ball rolling and rolling pretty fast, do you think you've satisfactorily set the stage that come January, when the administration's going to change -- regardless of who assumes -- that this ball will continue to roll? Is it moving on inevitably?

SEC. GEREN: I believe it will. And again, I don't want to make too much of General Caldwell, but you know, Leavenworth is one of the places from which information flows throughout our Army. And Caldwell's commitment is going to make a big difference.

General Cucolo, who was the chief of public affairs, is now head of the 3rd Infantry Division. He has very profound understanding of the importance of it. And he's a guy that will continue have top leadership roles in the Army.

So we're -- and then you don't have to worry about the young officers that are 22, 23, 24, 25 -- they brought it with them. And so I think we're moving in the right direction. We aren't where we want to be. It is, for somebody my age, it's like we're learning a second language. But I understand the power of it and I give -- any place I give speeches, I talk about it, I emphasize it. And it's -- I started to say it's resonating, as if I could take responsibility for it. I'm not the only one talking about it. I think you know from Caldwell, when he was over in theater, he has folks that blogged nonstop 24-hours-a-day. That was part of his mission and they do it today over there now.

So it's catching on. We're not where we need to be, but as folks my age retire and they start getting replaced by the tens of thousands extraordinary young folks, it's going to be second nature.

MR. HOLT: All right. Any other questions -- yes.

Q (Off mike.)

MR. HOLT: Yeah, probably ought to.

Q Mr. Secretary, this is Troy Stuart from Bluehammer.com. I have two questions for you, actually.

The first one is, is since, you know, the Army definitely sees the importance of blogs and how much impact they have on the public perception, but unfortunately, most of the public doesn't -- I would say a majority doesn't go to blogs. They go to the top three news stations at 6:00 at night and that's it. Has the Army given any thought about really publicizing blogs through its media outlets it has through either commercials, AFN, Army publications -- starting to drive people towards, whether it's milblogging.com or the military.com blog site, of starting to essentially put out to the American public that doesn't necessarily follow them all the time, hey, this is a good avenue -- this is a good outlet to go check out and, you know, there's a good message going out there? That's my first one.

SEC. GEREN: You know, that's a good question. I really had not thought about that before.

You all would know this better than I: It's my impression that for a large segment of the population, particularly those that are 30 and below, they don't go to the top three media outlets anymore. They don't go there at all. They turn on their computer and go straight to the news sources that they're interested in. And this is just my sense that the folks on the blogosphere has mushroomed. You know, just everyday the people that use blogs for gathering information and disseminating information is growing by -- at least -- do you all studies show that or not? I think that's just my sense. Just more and

more, you see even what's in the mainstream media -- so-called mainstream or traditional media -- is it's quoting blogs, it's being driven by blogs.

My sense is, particularly for the 30 and below, the traditional media is like a Model-T.

Q I think mainstream media covers it when it's just a good news byte. For example, Lieutenant -- (inaudible) -- and that being shut down. When there's something out there that gives them an edge to go after and gives them a story, I think we'll see -- I've seen them quoted, but otherwise it's not really -- you know, they don't really cover it -- just my opinion. SEC. GEREN: Yeah, well, but I mean, as far as where people get their news and whether or not there's any need to try to draft people to blog, it seems to me that people are choosing to go to blogs.

Do you all have any way to do studies to show the rate of increase of people who go to blogs as an information gathering? I would have to think that there's just a chart where the line is going straight up.

MR. HOLT: Yes, sir. This is Jack, by the way.

And we have seen a few studies in that. The Pew has done -- the Pew Centers have done quite a few studies in that. And as a matter of fact, there was a Zogby poll back in February of 2007 that stated that the Internet had replaced television as people's main source of news.

So those are trending that way. Yes, sir, they are.

SEC. GEREN: That's sure my sense of it.

And I don't know that -- I mean, it hadn't crossed my mind that we would need to drive people that way. My thought is everybody's going that way and we're trying to catch up. (Laughter.)

Q Roger, sir.

My question is there's definitely a disparity or a difference between all branches of service on guidelines and rules of blogging.

And you know, from definitely the Air Force has extreme different views than the Navy versus the Army and Marines.

Do you know if there's been any talk amongst your staff or yourself with the other service chiefs or the other secretaries or maybe between the service chiefs about trying to come up with one common set of rules? Because as we, you know, we're a force out there that, you know, joint service is now common, all right? I was an ETT in Afghanistan and I served alongside Marines, Air Force and Navy out in the deserts of Afghanistan. But each one had different rules, regardless of what command they fell under, what they were allowed to blog.

So I'm curious if there's been any talk or direction to try to get one uniform DOD standard?

SEC. GEREN: That's a good point. I think the answer is no.

We're working in our PA shop to come up with uniform guidance to use across the Army. But that's a good suggestion and I'll ask General Bergner to coordinate with the other services.

You know, there's probably going to be some challenges in getting them to all -- getting everybody to all agree on it -- just thinking about the theater and the different missions that the services have. And it's -- I don't know if each service would differ in the amount of discretion they give commanders out in the field. You've got issues of operational security. You've got issues of good order and discipline and there is going to be a certain amount of discretion that we're always going to leave to the commander.

He or she in the field is going to have to make decisions based on the circumstances that face their troops. And I just -- until I listen to a debate among the services, I wouldn't try to guess the chances getting everybody to agree on what set of guidelines. But my intuition is that there may be some challenges when you get down to the type of specificity that would be meaningful.

Probably you could always agree on general principles, but my guess is that you're going to find the services are going to customize them based on the way we each perceive the mission of our servicemen and women. But that's -- I'll talk with General Bergen about that. That's a good point.

Q Thank you, sir. I appreciate it.

MR. HOLT: And --

Q Hi, Mr. Secretary. My name is Karen Ziginfus (sp). I'm a military spouse. I also write for SpouseBUZZ, which is obviously a website -- a blog for military spouses.

And when you all do these roundtables -- whether it's with the mil bloggers or if you have other senior leadership, or senior leadership spouses coming in and talking about issues related to whether they're active duty service or with the family members and things -- I kind of actually have two questions. Part of it is, what kind of follow up do you have in place, so if someone presents you with an idea or a concept or a way to improve something, and then you all discuss it at your level, how do you come back to the level where it was brought from, whether it's a senior spouse and new spouse, you know, middle grade enlisted, the middle grade officers -- to make sure that the concept that was presented to you, that you fully understand what that was to do a follow-up like, okay, is this what you were talking about, is this what you were saying, to make sure that in the higher levels, where you are, it doesn't get misconstrued or misinterpreted?

SEC. GEREN: Well, that's a good point. I just think in -- I did a roundtable recently with -- (inaudible) -- was on it; five or six bloggers from the focus on family and military issues. We got several good suggestions. And one of the bloggers emphasized the importance -- in fact, she kept coming back to emphasizing the importance of our doing a better job of reaching out to parents of soldiers, that she felt we were doing a better job of reaching out to spouses, but not doing a very good job of reaching out to parents.

And so I left that and immediately called up John McDonnell, he's a general officer that's in charge of the Army-Family Action Plan and said, you know, she raised this issue and she's a spouse and she's a mom of a soldier.

And let's figure out what we can do to do a better job of reaching out to parents. And you know, come up with a plan and get back to me. And I'd just came back from -- (inaudible). Right before I left I sent him another e-mail and said, you know, where do we stand? We've got a soldier family board of directors meeting coming up and I said I want that to be on the agenda.

So I guess to your specific question of do I get back to the person who raised the issue and tell them what we've done? I haven't done that, probably should. But I take that input seriously and act on it. And whether it's talking to bloggers or talking to soldiers, I write myself a list of all the good suggestions that come back and get the system to respond to them. But good pointing out -- do we get back to those who came up with a good idea? At some of the town hall meetings if people bring issues up we take their -- or myself takes their name and we get back to them and report to them on what we've done. I'm not sure we've been doing that with the blogs. We take seriously and we act on it, but that's a good point. They probably would appreciate our getting back to them and saying, you know, here's what you suggested and here's what we've done. That's a good suggestion.

Q Thank you, sir.

I just have one other quick comment. With the world of technology that we're in with the blogs and everything and our media outlets and stuff, I mean, it's an incredible resource for people. But I'm concerned that somewhere down the line we're going to forget the face-to-face contact and the importance of the family members seeing those of you in higher leadership and really showing -- you know, literally showing your face and saying, hey, I care. I am concerned. These issues are important to me, whether it's family members, the soldiers, the spouses. The parents, especially, as well. That is definitely a big issue.

But I'm afraid that in our technology age that at some point, there's not going to be anymore of the face-to-face contact. And I think that the face-to-face is incredibly important for a lot of people to really see -- to really know that you or whomever are willing to go to the different installations and put yourself out there and say, you know, what can we do to improve your life?

SEC. GEREN: Yeah. I couldn't agree more. And that is -- that's something that we've got to be aware of. You cannot let -- the information world in which we live where you can stay plugged in through the web and through blogs and through traditional media 24- hours a day, you can't allow yourself to get absorbed by that and it can become a substitute for that sort of personal interaction and there is no substitute for that personal interaction. I couldn't agree more.

And you can share great information by typing on the web, but there's nothing like looking into somebody's eyes and understanding the passion they feel about an issue. And in many cases, for so many of the soldiers and their families that are dealing with the challenges that we face as an Army today, reading their face is as important as reading their words.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: And just an update sir: Carla Lewis (sp) is in the audience. And she was the one that had the question about the parental outreach. And you've just given her an update and she's very grateful for it! SEC. GEREN: Well, that's great. I appreciate it. Thanks, Carla, for raising that issue.

And of course, in our blog not only did she raise it, but she came back to it as we were wrapping up. And her emphasis on it, you know, I think carried the day with everybody in the room. We left there and immediately went to work on it.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you, sir.

Q Sir, Major Chuck Ziegrist. I write blog called, "FromMyPosition", which I'm certain is actually the page your browser opens to every morning. (Laughter.)

I have a statement and a question that I have for you: We would never consider in a million years sending a soldier to the range with a rifle that he hasn't been trained on. And when we look at military blogs with soldiers blogging, because they don't necessarily have to talk about the military, we're talking about probably the most effective weapon in the information operations warfare that we do.

It can be a recruiting tool and at the same time it can be used for nefarious purposes, whether it's your Scott Beauchamp (sp) our other people that want to flat out lie and not tell the Army's story -- not tell the good story. The majority of bloggers that are out there that write about the military, one of the things that is a common theme is we want to tell people the good stories that they don't hear on the news. And that's why people come to blogs instead of going to CNN -- instead of just getting the body count.

And one thing that I've seen over the last three years as an officer is that we don't have any methodology in the Army to train a soldier: If you want to blog, these are the ground rules. This is what you can talk about, this is what you can't. When you're here, this is how you -- who you have to report to, if people have to approve your stories and if they don't.

And I think that, one, it would help us to have a very liberal regulation -- specifically on blogging -- what the Army says you can and cannot do. But again, very liberal, because everyone that feels overly constrained -- our soldiers are still going to say what they want to say. And you're either going to have people that are telling the Army's story. And a lot of them, where people that say it's too restrictive and the guys that would normally tell the good story aren't going to tell the story. They're going to just keep it to themselves. But the guys that have a grudge are going to tell their story regardless of the consequences. So the bad news goes and the good news, again, doesn't get out.

So I'd ask you to please consider making that priority of writing a good, but liberal regulation on blogging. And making it something that's, you know, whether it's an AKO learning module or something that's done through blackboard or something -- even if it's a PowerPoint slide that you show during one of your pre-deployment briefs. If you're going to write, go ahead! We encourage it! We want you to write about what you do day-to-day, whether it's the food in the chow hall or dealing with the local nationals that clean the port- a-johns on the FOB -- whatever you do, let people know what it's like. I think it would be a great recruiting tool for us, and also, you know, we might actually teach some of our soldiers some good grammar and syntax. (Laughter.)

The last bit there is not just training them on blogging, the Army doesn't train people on the one tool we use every day.

SEC. GEREN: That's a very good suggestion. Our public affairs leadership is working on guidelines for blogging. But your point about actually not just having guidelines, but teaching, would -- could be very valuable. And have people go in and understanding left and right limits, and also the thought behind left and right limits and cooperating with the guidelines doesn't lead to frustration or a sense of censorship.

We've got to in the Army -- and you appreciate it better than I ever could -- when it comes to public communications, whether it's blogs or talking to traditional media -- talking to radio stations, talking TV -- we tend to have a very risk averse culture. Our senior enlisted and our officers think that, well, I'll never get in trouble if I keep my mouth shut. And they are inclined to avoid telling the Army story and we suffer because of that.

And they are risk averse, frankly and unfortunately, for good reason. People will make a mistake and then they get professionally or publicly embarrassed and then they never talk again. So as an Army, we've really got to get away from this zero defect mentality when it comes to public communications, whether it's on the blog or other types of new media or in the traditional media. It's key.

The best spokespersons we have for our Army are the people that are out there doing it every day. They may not be Abraham Lincoln when it comes to eloquence, but they've got an eloquence that really connects with every day Americans. And I believe it's absolutely key for us to use those million soldiers as spokespersons for the Army.

And every soldier today that's got a digital camera and cell phone and a laptop has got literally reach around the world. And they are our best ambassadors for the Army. And I want to get them out. And I want to help develop a culture that has a tolerance for the occasional gaffe. You look at very skilled communicators like people running for Senate, running for president, running for the highest office -- everybody has their gaffe that they wish they could take back. No matter how good you are, you're going to stub your toe if you're in the public arena. And we've got to get our soldiers to understand, you know, get out there and tell what you're doing and if you goof that doesn't mean that's the end of your career. But I think a lot of them believe that it is. And how we get a culture that's willing to take risks in that domain is a real challenge for us.

And let me just say one thing further: I think as an organization and one of the great things about the Army is that it's a humble, keep your head down and do your job and don't try to draw attention to yourself. All the things that your parents tell you growing up that good people ought to do. And in the information world in which we live today, that's a disadvantage.

We need our soldiers to tell their story. And when you've got a million soldiers and most of them have been to theater, most of them are involved in the great progress we've made in this war, they don't have to be -- have the front-page story in The New York Times. If they blog and tell the people they reach on a blog, if they tell their spouses, if they tell their friends, if they tell their parents, the multiplier of a million people times two, three, four, five, six pretty soon starts to reach most of America. And they don't do it, because we're just general disinclined towards public communication. It's something that we've -- we've got to encourage.

But getting back to your first point, we need to have -- do a better job of having everybody understand what the left and right limits are and again, the philosophy behind the left and right limits so they know how much room they have to run and get them out there telling the Army's story.

Q Yes, sir. Thank you for your time.

MR. HOLT: And thank you, sir, for joining us for the bloggers' roundtable. And I know we've kind of stretched your time limit here. And we do appreciate you staying with us and being with us today, sir.

SEC. GEREN: Well, thank you all. (Applause.)

I appreciate you letting me join you and look forward to continuing to develop my own education and fluency in the new media and in the world in which you all live and work. But thanks a lot and I hope that your conference goes well.

MR. HOLT: Thank you very much, sir.

SEC. GEREN: My pleasure.

END.